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Burma unrest escalates in worst violence in years

Thousands of displaced Muslim Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists need food and water in Burma after fleeing the country's worst clashes in years.



A resident rides her bicycle past burned houses amid ongoing violence in Sittwe, capital of Burma's western state of Rakhine. (AFP)

Houses were burnt down late on Wednesday in two villages near the Bangladesh border but there were no reports of further deaths. Scores of people are feared to have been killed in the rioting that broke out in Rakhine state on June 8.

Places that were flashpoints earlier in the week, including the state capital Sittwe, were quiet as violence started to subside after days of arson attacks and killing that have presented reformist President Thein Sein with one of his biggest challenges since taking office last year.

"Tensions between the two groups have eased.

There are around 20 000 refugees in Sittwe. Most of them are from the villages where people fled in fear of the violence," Aung Myat Kyaw, a senator for Rakhine state, said.

"They are in need of food and, because of the heavy rain, there are concerns about the refugees' health and whether they have enough shelter," he added.

The violence had killed 21 people as of Monday, state media said, but activists fear the death toll could be much higher. At least 1 600 houses have been burnt down.

Ensuring safety

The army has taken hundreds of Rohingyas to Muslim villages outside Sittwe to ensure their safety.

“They are worried for their lives. The army is there so their life is secure,” said Shwe Maung, a Muslim member of Parliament for the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. “There are still so many Rohingyas in downtown Sittwe and they are afraid of being attacked.”

The United Nations and a medical aid group said this week they were pulling staff out of the area because of the violence. UN special envoy for Burma, Vijay Nambiar, travelled to the area on Wednesday.

Speaking at an International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva, the first stop on a five-nation European tour, Burmese Nobel laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi expressed concern about the unrest and said laws needed to be enforced to prevent such conflicts from taking place.

“Without the rule of law, such communal strife will only continue,” she told a news conference.

“The present situation will have to be handled with delicacy and sensitivity and we need the cooperation of all people concerned to rebuild the peace that we want for our country.”

Food shortages could last three to four days as poor roads and infrastructure delayed supplies from aid organisations, said Htun Myit Thein of the Wan Latt Foundation, which is managing three camps that together hold about 12 000 people in Sittwe.

Tensions flared

“The camps aren’t clean enough and some of the men are getting ill,” he said. “So far there is no support from the government or international groups.”

It is unclear what sparked the rioting. Relations between the two communities have been uneasy for generations and tension flared last month after the gang rape and murder of a Buddhist woman that was blamed on Muslims.

That led to the killing of 10 Muslims in reprisal on June 3, when a Buddhist mob stopped a bus they were travelling on. The passengers had no connection to the murdered woman. State media said three Muslims are on trial for the woman’s death.

The violence follows a year of dramatic political change after nearly 50 years of repressive military rule, which includes the release of hundreds of political prisoners and truces with ethnic minority rebels.

The government has also allowed trade unions and promised to get rid of forced labour. Recognising this progress, the International Labour Organisation lifted restrictions on Burma on Wednesday.

The communal violence in Rakhine state and the international reaction may prompt further change: the Rohingyas are not included among the officially recognised ethnic groups of Burma but Thein Sein may be forced to improve their plight.

Up to 800 000 Rohingyas live along Burma’s border with Bangladesh in abject conditions. Neither country recognises them as citizens and the Bangladeshi authorities have turned away boats of Rohingyas fleeing the violence this week. – Reuters